

Knowledge Management in the Public Sector: A Survey

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The last couple of years have seen a wave of knowledge management activity sweeping through the Federal government. We saw Chief Knowledge Officers (CKO's), Knowledge Directors or their equivalents named in agencies and bureaus; conferences and seminars conducted; and vendors knocking on doors with their KM offerings. Yet we lack a good understanding, in quantitative terms, of what is being done, by whom, and where. While we cannot claim to be out of the dark re KM in government, at least we now have the results of a survey recently conducted on this topic.

First blush analysis of the results show the military substantially ahead of the pack in knowledge management initiatives throughout the Federal government; with a healthy showing of activity underway in many civilian agencies, as well as in state and local governments. Furthermore, while a large number of respondents were in the "thinking about it" stage, there are already many agencies building portals, fostering communities of practice, developing document management systems, and/or working with collaboration technologies.

The Conference

From April 9-12, 2001 the Second Annual E-Gov Knowledge Management Conference was held at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center, in Washington, DC. Titled *Knowledge Management as the Catalyst for E-Government* it was co-chaired by Ramon Barquin (President, Barquin International) and Shereen Remez (CKO, AARP). Keynoters included the Comptroller General of the United States, David Walker, Nicky Oppenheimer, head of KM for the British government, Paul Brubaker, president of Commerce One, and knowledge management gurus and luminaries like Steve Denning (World Bank), Larry Prusak (IBM) and Tom Davenport (Accenture).

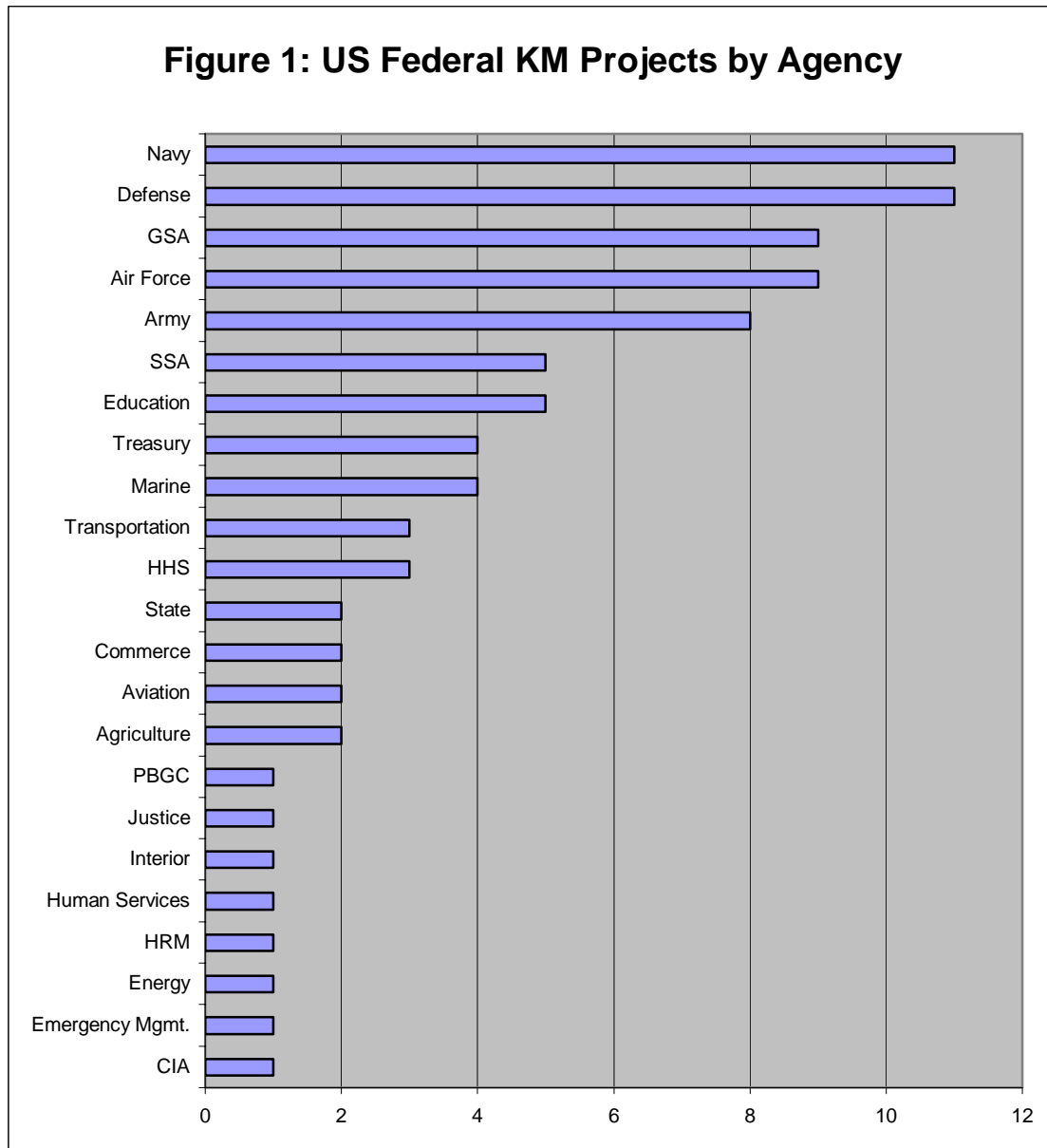
The event attracted several hundred participants from government and industry. While the bulk of attendees came from the Federal government, there was a sizable representation from state, local and foreign governments present. Interesting examples of knowledge management initiatives in Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom and South Africa were presented; and about fifty KM vendors exhibited their products during the third day.

The survey

It became clear during the conference, that much was not known about the knowledge management activity throughout the public sector, and the gathering of a significant

number of practitioners in one single place offered a unique opportunity to gather some critical information. Hence, at the conclusion of the conference, we surveyed the attendees about the knowledge management projects they are working on in their respective organizations. With this survey we attempted to identify the various disciplines being explored in public sector knowledge management work and the development stages the projects are in. We also asked for brief descriptions of the goals and scopes of the projects.

We received full responses from 117 attendees covering many federal agencies, several state government organizations, and a few private sector firms. Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of knowledge management projects being conducted in several US federal



agencies. Of these 117 responses, 103 reported active involvement in a knowledge

management project. Over half of the respondents reported more than a year's experience working on knowledge management, and the average experience level was more than two years.

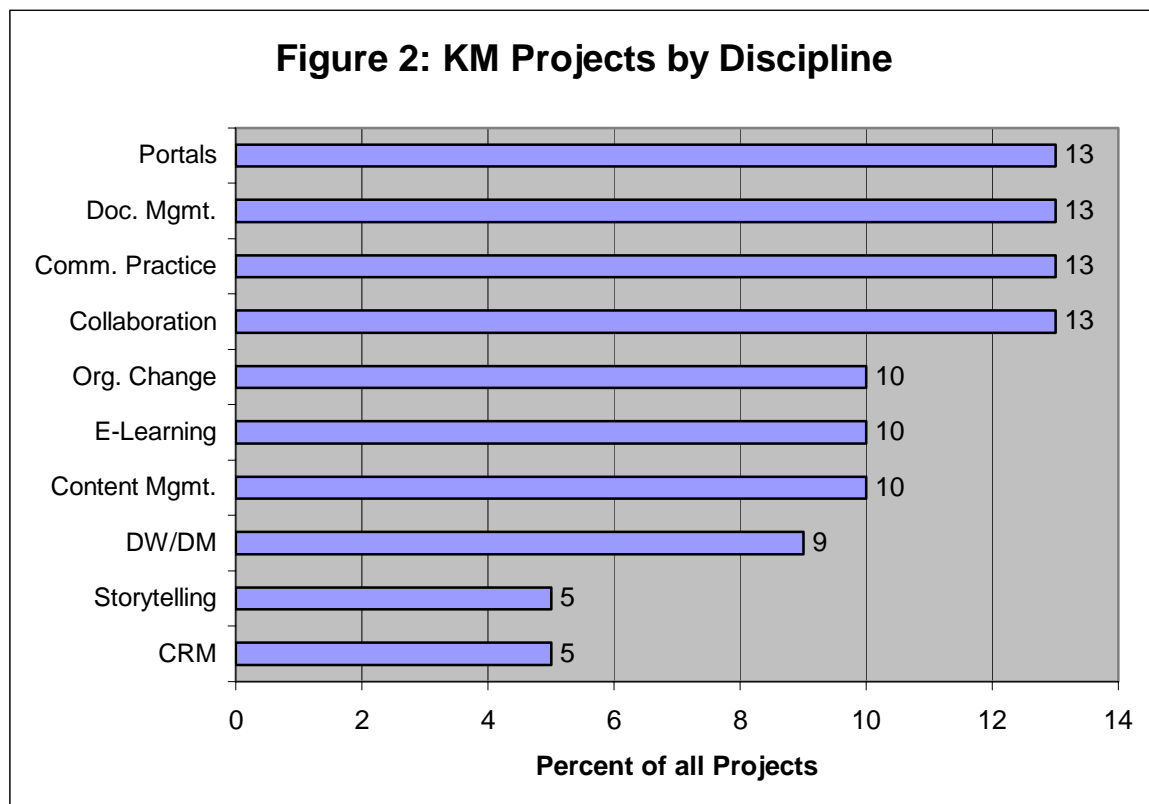
Project analysis

Let us start by acknowledging that this survey represents nothing more than the responses from the participants at the conference. It cannot be assumed that the results have any other statistical significance beyond the stated. That said, however, given the nature of the conference and the size of the attendance, it is fair to say that the survey results provide some needed insight as to who is doing what within the government knowledge management community.

We have analyzed the survey results by KM Discipline and by Project Stage, each of which is described in more detail below.

KM Discipline

The survey asked respondents to classify their projects by one or more knowledge management disciplines. The complete list included Customer Relationship Management, Data Warehouse/Data Mining, Portals, E-Learning, Community of Practice, Document Management, Storytelling, Content Management, Collaboration, Organizational Change, and Other. Figure 2 shows the project disciplines chosen by the attendees to describe their projects in rank order.



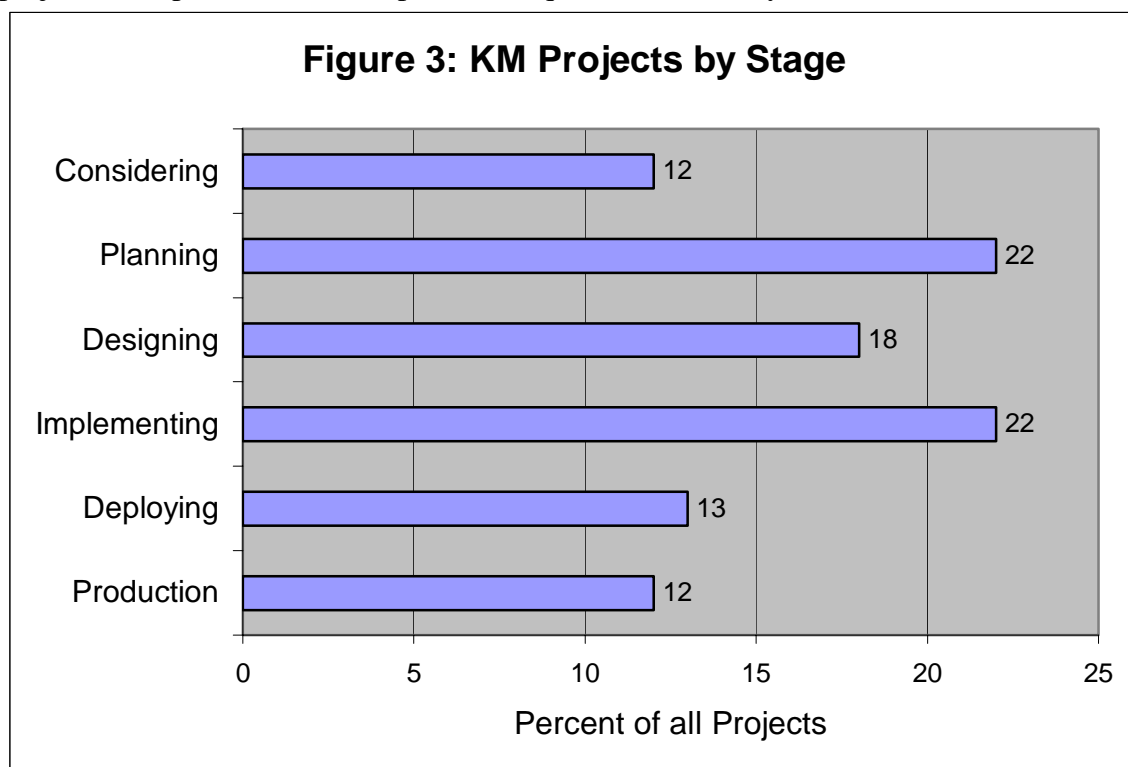
Results show an overall public sector landscape of projects that are geared toward

providing better collection of, classification of, and access to existing information, including the establishment of collaborative communities that can make productive use of the information. Projects with these goals include those employing portals, document and content management, collaboration, and community of practice disciplines.

Approximately equal in number of projects but more diverse in disciplines is the body of work aimed at more strategic goals. Disciplines involved in this work include analytical techniques such as data warehouse/data mining and CRM, and human capital development initiatives such as storytelling, e-learning, and organizational change.

Project Stage

Figure 3 shows a breakdown of knowledge management projects by development stage. While a number of projects are in production, the majority of projects are currently being planned, designed, or implemented. We did not attempt to determine when these projects would be completed, but given the typical survival rate and development cycles for projects of this type, it seems likely that as many as half of these will enter deployment or production phases in the next year. This assertion is borne out by some of the verbatim project descriptions that accompanied the quantitative survey results.



Project stories

Knowledge management has suffered the reputation of strategic irrelevance at times, but the results of this survey point out several projects in the public sector that stress knowledge management as not only strategic but mission critical. The project descriptions in this survey demonstrate several common themes in public sector

knowledge management work and common challenges that both public and private sector organizations have to overcome in using knowledge for strategic aims.

Themes

The theme of this E-Gov conference was the role of knowledge management as a catalyst for electronic government, and the projects underway in the federal government as represented by our survey are squarely aimed at the electronic production of services and at other key agency initiatives. After reviewing the scope and mission alignment of the projects in our survey, we grouped them into three thematic categories. Strategic themes are those that show a causal effect between the project objective and a key agency objective or mission. Tactical themes show a less critical effect but still demonstrate a measurable link between the project and improved operations. Some projects address a multitude of themes, both strategic and tactical, so we classified these projects as “multidimensional.”

The first strategic theme is using knowledge management to produce a better information or knowledge product. This theme recognizes information as the core attribute of the product created by an agency and describes knowledge management as the core process used to create it. For example, the Naval War College is deploying a knowledge sharing process, including decision-making tools, to facilitate the global war games. A similar project sponsored by the DIA uses a portal and content management system to produce “authoritative intelligence products...on demand.”

Using knowledge management to improve operational efficiency by reducing structural cost emerges as a second strategic theme. The key to strategic linkage in this case is demonstrating clear “bottom line” benefits through the use of knowledge management techniques. As an example, an SSA project designed to re-engineer the policy development process has as a clear goal “better, faster, cheaper” policy creation, distribution, and evaluation. An Air Force communication and information directorate project has as its stated objective “inexpensive approaches to sharing information.”

Many agencies are proactively dealing with forecasted changes in the organization such as turnover and retirements, and projects linked to these initiatives constitute a third strategic theme. The SSA, for instance, has several initiatives in production and in development aimed at “systematizing” tacit and explicit knowledge in anticipation of what is described as a “retirement wave” in the near future. The Illinois Department of Transportation has a similar project in the works to capture key knowledge ahead of retirements and to make lateral movement and succession planning in the organization more effective. Several organizations extended this idea in the opposite direction, using knowledge capturing activities as a way to bring new employees up to speed more rapidly. Finally, several public and private sector organizations listed projects aimed at capturing the knowledge of subject matter experts as they rotate through assignments.

Tactical themes in this set of projects included improving consistency in the way information is produced or processed and generally improving the ways in which teams work together. While these themes are more difficult to link to the organization’s

strategic mission, they still represent important activities in the organization. For instance, another SSA project in its early stages is designed to help administrative law judges make more consistent decisions. A Navy medical project, like a similar one in the Army medical command, seeks to share best practices among treatment facilities and practitioners.

Finally, several projects described in the survey employed multiple knowledge management disciplines for multiple organizational purposes. These multidimensional projects are noteworthy for their ambitious scopes and attempts to integrate social and technical design elements into a holistic approach. One such project at the Louisiana Department of Revenue seeks to redesign their tax planning system specifically to standardize how they collect and use information. They have already redesigned their organizational structure (first!) to create policy service groups and are now redesigning their website, implementing an e-learning system, and beginning the implementation of cross-functional teams and a new management development program. Another example is the Commerce Department's Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP), which seeks to improve the competitiveness of small and medium sized US manufacturing businesses. MEP has established a community of practice of local manufacturing specialists and armed them with an extranet that supplies collaboration, e-learning, live instructor-led learning, document authoring and management, online meetings, and best practices. The MEP approach also includes a CRM system to help manage interaction with outreach centers.

Challenges

As there were several common themes reported by the participants in this survey, there were also several common challenges. These challenges are already familiar to knowledge management practitioners: gaining senior leadership buy-in, motivating users to participate (especially in capturing knowledge), fear of airing "dirty laundry" to others in the organization, cost of implementing new systems, and fighting resistance from parts of the organization. It would appear, however, that the conference attendees might have gained insights from the conference presenters to help them overcome these challenges. One respondent acknowledged that using technology to facilitate the development of knowledge management is not the recommended approach but felt that the culture of his organization would require that technology lead the effort. Another respondent cited storytelling as a way to help gain support from senior leaders. Still another recognized the need to engage the attention of various directors in her organization as a way to integrate several activities that are proceeding on a standalone basis today.

Conclusion

While the history of mankind is coupled very tightly to knowledge -- our very name as a species (Homo Sapiens, or "knowing man") points to the central relationship between man and knowledge -- knowledge management as a discipline is still in its infancy. Hence there are still many things which we do not know as we move on the spectrum of KM progress.

One of the challenges that lie ahead is to achieve a better understanding of how to effectively use knowledge management in the different arenas of human endeavor. This leads us to explore knowledge management in the various industry sectors, such as government.

The public sector happens to be a particularly fruitful area for the application of knowledge management tools and techniques because of the current thrust toward electronic government.

While we clearly need to do much more research in the near future, this survey starts to provide us with some limited insights as to what is happening with the discipline in the government setting.

About the Authors:

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